

The conclusions middle managers draw from their beliefs about organisational coaching and their coaching practices.

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Abstract

This article reports on a phenomenological study that examined middle managers beliefs about organisational coaching and their coaching practices. The study also investigated middle managers' conclusions, drawn from the relationship between these two objects. Two unstructured in-depth interviews based on participants' coaching experience were conducted with each of four middle managers who came from different Lithuanian corporate organisations. The article provides a more thorough understanding of middle managers' views about their own beliefs and their coaching practices. It is expected that managers of all levels and those who provide coaching training in organisations, would benefit from this study.

Keywords: coaching, coaching practice, middle managers, beliefs, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

There is a strong consensus amongst writers on coaching that coaching is an important activity that most managers need to develop and perform as an integral part of their everyday management practice (Uyterhoeven, 1972; Megginson and Boydell, 1979; Zeus and Skiffington, 2000; Hunt and Weintraub, 2002; 2006; Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005; Pemberton, 2006, Hamlin *et al.*, 2006, CIPD report, 2007; Clutterbuck, 2008). Literature addressed to managers emphasises their importance as human potential developers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992) and highlights the challenges for their role as coaches (Howe, 2008, Stoker, 2006). More specifically, Hunt and Weintraub (2006) and Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) state that managers at all levels of the organisational hierarchy, including middle managers, are responsible for the implementation of the coaching culture in organisations: for instance, starting with individual managerial initiatives and ending with involvement in the entire organisational coaching setting.

Despite the quantity of coaching literature, only a few contributions emphasise the impact of a managerial mindset on organisational coaching practices and take middle managers into consideration (e.g. Hunt, Zeus & Skiffington, 2000; Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002; Weintraub, 2002; Mackintos, 2003; Amy, 2007; Pousa & Mathieu, 2010).

Although there are well founded arguments favouring implications for middle managers as learning facilitators in organisations (Clutterbuck, 2008), they are not explicitly detailed in terms of middle managers' beliefs affecting their behavioural approaches in coaching practice. According to Howe (2008), there still remains a substantial uncertainty as to whether middle managers are capable of performing as coaches, because of their mixed motives to coach or their beliefs about their own roles as a coach (Stoker, 2006).

Fisher (1989), Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) and Garvey *et al.* (2009) suggest investigating the field of managerial beliefs, and specifically the middle management level as those managers are most likely to progress as coaches (Ellinger *et al.*, 2003). Authors state that there is a lack of focus on managerial mindset as more attention is devoted to management behaviours or styles without discussing the things that managers really care about, such as their personal values and visions, or a set of core beliefs that influence their managerial practices. “The resulting picture is incomplete – not wrong, but not entirely right either. It is like trying to explain why a glove moves without discussing the hand inside it” (Fisher, 1989, p.34).

Research Focus

The research study investigated middle managers’ beliefs about organisational coaching and their coaching practices. It also explored middle managers’ metacognitions provided in the form of their perceptions, understandings and conclusions drawn from the relationship between these two objects. The areas of analysis are presented in the Figure 1:

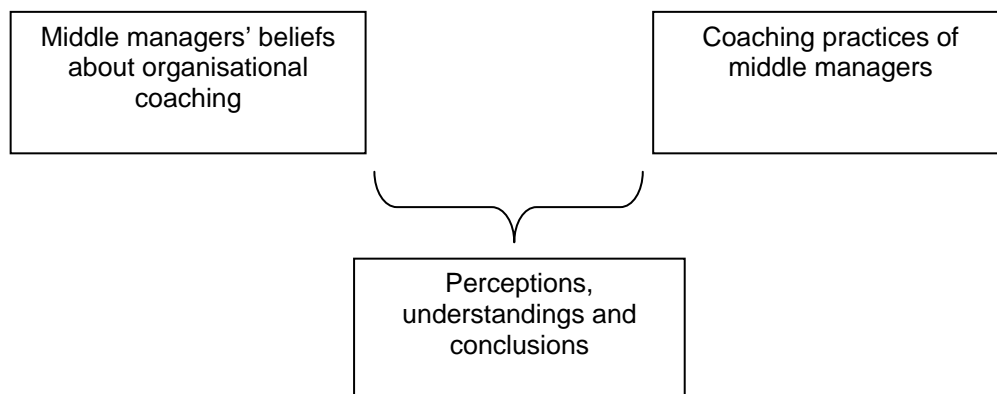


Figure 1: Areas of analysis

The rationale for going to the deeper level of metacognitive analysis is based on the following arguments: firstly, according to Chan *et al.* (2005) metacognition promotes awareness of learning, selection of action strategy, and improves planning effectiveness. Thus, it is expected that the findings of this study will suggest new possible developments of coaching in both individual managerial and organisational levels. Secondly, based on Paris’ (2002) assumptions, exploring the metacognitions of middle managers will facilitate:

- a) exploring ideas about coaching contexts in organisations;
- b) projecting possible decisions and actions middle managers would take in the contexts of coaching;
- c) providing recommendations for managers to perform better as coaches.

Literature review: middle managers as human potential developers

Researchers provide strong arguments that middle management performs a pivotal role in the integration of knowledge and experience to generate practical applications within a given strategic framework (Janczak, 2004; Pritchett, 2006). Middle managers are called a “fertile ground” for creative ideas about how to grow and change, they are capable of adding meaningful contributions to strategy, tactics, and employees’ development (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992, 1994; Huy, 2001; Mayer and Smith, 2007).

Research also shows that even though middle managers recognise themselves as learning facilitators and “coaches” in particular, there is still some serious ambiguity for coaching implementation in organisations from middle managers’ perspectives (Stoker, 2006). By the same token, Howe (2008) further explains that limiting beliefs and conflicting roles cause further issues for their performance as coaches. Therefore, managers are facing issues such as lack of a deep rapport, boundaries in the coaching relationship with subordinates, lack of emotional awareness, shortage of quality time for coaching and mixed motives for coaching.

Zeus and Skiffington (2000) Pemberton (2006), Hunt and Weintraub (2002), Mackintosh (2003), Starr (2004), Sambrock and Stewart (2000) provide an extensive list of requirements for managers who want to become effective coaches, namely: a helpful attitude, less need for control, enthusiasm for coaching, empathic dealing with others, openness to personal learning and receiving feedback, high personal standards, a desire to help others to develop and an understanding that most people do want to learn. According to Hunt and Weintraub (2002), coaching managers who hold contrary beliefs and attitudes will perform poorly, for example, they will attempt to demonstrate their “toughness”, will not search for more alternatives which in turn will then limit their subordinates’ development; they will focus only on immediate results and in some cases may become cynical or hostile.

Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) argue that manager’s coaching behaviours strongly depend upon their assumptions, mentality and theories in use (Argyris and Schon, 1989), which form attitudes, thought and decision processes, and ultimately, behaviour. This study also accentuates considerable differences between managerial role and manager’s role as a coach. Even if managers can make a distinction between their management and coach role, they still have to reframe these roles and consciously attempt to serve as facilitators of learning. Incongruence, tensions, and conflicts continue until new concepts of coaching and being a coach integrate or replace the old ones (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Beattie, 2006, Amy, 2007, Moen and Kvalsund, 2008).

In summary, it is apparent that mental models play a vital role in influencing managers’ coaching performance and influence managers’ coaching behaviours and overall performance. Although there is a body of literature that explicitly analyses managerial thinking within organisational and learning context, there is a lack research which focuses on the underlying assumptions of middle managers as coaches.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed in order to examine middle managers beliefs about coaching, their coaching practices and their conclusions drawn from these two. IPA is a hermeneutic inquiry and is concerned with understanding individuals’ lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences. In this way IPA focuses on the exploration of co-researchers’ experiences, understandings perceptions and views (Brocki and Wearden, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2009), which is consistent with the formulation of the research questions of this study.

Four co-researchers were invited to this research study. The following criteria were initially set for the co-researchers:

1. The intention was to concentrate on people who are qualified enough (via coaching and managerial experience) to engage in descriptively-focused inquiry (Spinelli, 2005).
2. In order to reflect the scope of the study, co-researchers were fully employed in organisations in the middle management level.

3. A co-researcher had to have corporate experience of daily organisational activities, such as performing the functions of middle manager, including employees' development.
4. Co-researchers had to have a specific training in coaching of a high quality.
5. Co-researchers had to employ a coaching approach in their daily business with subordinates and/or peers.
6. Co-researchers had to be interested in the objectives of the study so they respond freely, openly and with enthusiasm.

The inquiry design

Barcelos and Kalaja (2006) state that an awareness of the beliefs of individuals and actual contexts, where the individuals engage with their activities, is the most important factor that needs to be taken into account when trying to understand the relationship between individuals' beliefs and actions. From another point of view, McLucas (2003) suggests that in order to elicit and interpret managerial cognition, it is necessary to get to the "heart" of the question. It is also important to analyse and compare specific cognitive content, views and perspectives, underlying assumptions, and hidden agendas.

Drawing on the above, two unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with each of co-researchers. The first interview concentrated on their organisational coaching experiences, while in the second the co-researchers provided their thoughts on the relationship between their beliefs about organisational coaching and their coaching practice. There were also two stages of analysing the data. In the first stage, the beliefs about organisational coaching and coaching practices of the co-researchers were investigated. In the second stage, the conclusions of co-researchers were analysed and discussed.

Findings and discussion

Beliefs about organisational coaching

Table 1 shows the themes representing "beliefs about organisational coaching" which were thematically analysed and formed seven clusters. These seven clusters formed four categories of beliefs. The analysis provided in this part of the chapter answers the first research question: "What are the beliefs that middle managers hold about organisational coaching?"

Self efficacy and own roles	Organisation and management	Subordinates	Coaching
Beliefs about self efficacy and capabilities in coaching	Beliefs about organisation	Beliefs about subordinates (coachees)	Beliefs about coaching as an approach
Beliefs about own role as a middle manager	Beliefs about management		Beliefs about coaching as a practice in organisations

Table 1: Categories of middle managers' beliefs about organisational coaching

Self efficacy and own roles

Co-researchers witnessed considerable difference between directivity and non-directivity in their approach to coaching conversations they conduct with their subordinates. They believe that directivity implies limiting aspects which negatively affect the quality of coaching conversations, as manager M3 vividly explained:

[M3]: I think some see coaching as a training system with elements of punishment.

What is more, managers believe that a directive approach is incompatible with their understanding of managerial practices and coaching as a managerial activity, as manager M2 explained in more detail:

[M2]: They're [subordinates] certainly clever, educated and... To tell them that they're doing something wrong...it's not a good way...

Primarily the co-researchers believe that by using the directive approach in their daily management practice they limit their subordinates, leaving them without a potential choice for growth and development; on the other hand, they admit that directive approach implies a certain amount of effectiveness - for example, in cases when managers deal with inexperienced or novice employees.

All four middle managers acknowledged that they lack skills to coach professionally. However they also emphasised the understanding of coaching as an approach and the attributes of a trusting and supportive coaching relationship, thus already thinking beyond the coaching skills:

[M1]: I don't even comprehend fully what I have, what it is. I just know this... That love, well, I think when a person sits before me, I communicate with them, I really sincerely want to understand them.

Managers expressed the need for time resources for coaching since they feel the lack of time for coaching. However, the beliefs regarding time issues for coaching seem mixed. Manager M3 explained that in terms of time resources it would be useful to hire external coaches to develop their subordinates; on the other hand the same managers also said that external coaches would distort the manager-employee relationship and limit the value the manager creates to subordinates through coaching:

[M3]: All the employees I have spoken to, they value the fact that you have given them your time. So that's a great motivation...

Managers believe that if their coachee is a "powerful" person in organisation and has an advantage - for example, in terms of specific experience - or an authority among others, then it becomes a limitation for coaching. Managers assume that such people are unwilling to change and they tend to be described as senior individuals, holding on to their positions in the organisation; they usually have great experience but at the same time lack flexibility.

Co-researchers were in addition elaborating on emotional aspects of coaching relationship, thus accentuating sensitive issues such as trust and openness. These elaborations were congruent with Farrell's (2004) notions that a trusting relationship is an emotional one and in this case trust becomes a critical issue in establishing the effective relationship.

Regarding beliefs about their own role as a middle manager, co-researchers see it as their duty to defend the interests of their subordinates and serve as "advocates", "shock-absorbers", or "bridges":

[M1]: I have to show empathy, because it's sort of my obligation to be kind... in those situations I shouldn't be a... a prosecutor, but an advocate, a defender for those people. This word 'empower' them, is exactly what I aim for.

Thus, middle managers accentuate the human characteristic of approach they should stick to in their daily managerial practice thus demonstrating "personality centredness" as Hunt (1987, p. 14) puts it. Therefore, co-researchers regard coaching as congruent with such a perception of their role.

Beliefs about subordinates (coachees)

Co-researchers were substantially positive towards their subordinates. 'People are to be loved,' middle manager M1 stated in a reflective moment. This broad and self-explanatory notion was followed by more detailed statements provided by co-researchers: "People are to be understood [M4]", "I have to empower people [M1]", "people deserve lenience [M1]", "people are allowed to make mistakes [M1]", "they are not to be pushed [M3] ", and "they ought to be respected [M2]".

[M1]: I just let them make mistakes. And I just tell them, 'You know, the answer is with you. I don't know it.' I really don't, there are really many... many things that I don't know. You could have two, three possibilities, well; we try to find one out of those few.

Middle managers acknowledged that there are no ideal people who would perform perfectly in an organisation. It is rather their potential that makes people effective, as manager M2 explained:

[M2]: We all have very good qualities. And then probably some that are not very good. We're more gifted to do some things and definitely weaker with others and from that conviction comes my inability to sometimes... pressurise the person, if I see that they're weaker, I have to respect them, that's the way they are.

To conclude, the co-researchers' elaborations on people within organisational contexts seem positive and this supports the underlying assumptions expressed by co-researchers under this cluster of beliefs form a premise for effective coaching relationship (de Haan, 2008).

It is difficult to elaborate on middle managers' beliefs about coachees, as their respective beliefs seem to be mixed. Although co-researchers mainly express positive attitudes towards people in organisations they articulate many problematic issues regarding their beliefs about people in coaching contexts.

[M4]: One of the reactions of an employee is the refusal to open up, and another is that they show a lot of emotion!

[M3]: People feel inner discomfort [when invited for coaching]; they probably see it as a sort of exam...

Co-researchers stated that they believe their subordinates are afraid of questions and hesitate when being questioned in a coaching relationship. Although employees understand the principles of coaching, they are hesitant to enter into an open relationship, they lack focus on learning, as well as certain responsibility as coachees. As manager M1 explained:

[M1]: When I start asking questions and let the person take their own decision, people are afraid to, they don't want to, and they wait for my final word to actually instruct them to go and do this.

Co-researchers demonstrated their thinking beyond coaching contexts and identified some key conditions for coaching, such as trust and openness (de Haan, 2008). They felt themselves responsible for the quality of the coaching relationship which according to them is a great concern in organisations.

Beliefs about organisation and management in relation to coaching

Co-researchers were loquacious about their beliefs related to organisational settings where coaching takes place. They believe that organisational dimensions have strong impact on their coaching

initiatives. They acknowledged that coaching has to be a part of organisational culture and that managers need to be commissioned to coach. They also emphasised their belief that organisation has to be at a certain educational level in order to perform as “coaching organisation” as manager M3 elaborated:

[M3]: I can't imagine better conditions for coaching than in our company. Well, first and foremost, there is a high level of culture in our organisation. Culture, education, awareness... and the company is very democratic. Because of such high levels of democracy and culture, I think, the coaching is vital.

Despite different circumstances the co-researchers face in relationships with other managers in their organisations, when speaking about the influence of upper level managers they expressed clear beliefs that senior managers have a direct impact on their motivation to coach.

Manager M4 stated:

[M4]: Well, it is rather simple to be a coaching manager, if only because he's [senior manager] given me the complete freedom.

Manager M1 also emphasised the importance of the approach of her senior manager to her work, thus implying that when she feels empowered she is able to employ coaching more effectively:

[M1]: When the manager trusts me, he says, 'I give you all authority.' And this happening is, like, 'Wow'. It means I can do it. And it's...Self-esteem, confidence that you get. It's not excessive, but [enables] you to accept that responsibility.

Consistent with Antonioni's (1999) view co-researchers indicated that in order to practice coaching they need support, understanding and a degree of trust from the top managers.

Beliefs about coaching as an approach and a practice in organisations

Middle managers express beliefs that coaching is a philosophy, a paradigm or a kind of “a gift”, rather than a tangible and concrete method:

[M1]: I actually think [coaching] is more of a philosophy. It's a way of thinking to me.

The co-researchers believe that coaching is a resource which aims to develop and empower people in the organisation:

[M1]: It's devised to help people, empower them, and make them flourish.

Coaching is a constructive way to deal with issues:

[M2]: So again, application of coaching is just [a way] to avoid those non constructive responses - to avoid them completely. Now is not the time and the place to talk about it. We're talking about how and what needs doing to better out situation.

According to middle managers, coaching is rather an advanced approach to people in organisations. It should be applied when other organisational dimensions and systems - such as motivation, professional knowledge, compensation, adequate workload and formal development programs - are already in place. In this context coaching serves as an additional motivational driver and a tool.

As a summary, I propose that beliefs provided within this category inform about coaching as a way of managing. Although co-researchers acknowledge the importance of coaching skills, coaching according to their definitions falls beyond coaching skills and becomes an approach to managing. The uncertainties about coaching expressed by co-researchers evoke a degree of inner conflict in their roles and perceptions (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Stoker, 2006).

Coaching practices of middle managers

Managers were moderately explicit in discussing the coaching practices within organisations, as all of the co-researchers acknowledged that they use coaching quite rarely. In the first interview co-researchers were not particularly vocal when asked to comment on possible wider applications of coaching they practice. According to the co-researchers they do not use coaching on a regular basis:

[M2]: Primarily coaching to me isn't any kind of, 'And now it's my turn.' Although sometimes in my work planner I do write that I should 'do some coaching.'

Manager M3, however, confirmed that he uses sales coaching on a more regular basis as it is a formal initiative established by his organisation.

In addition, the co-researchers stated that coaching should be applied in unusual situations that subordinates deal with, thus implying that coaching yet again is set to deal with problematic situations:

[M2]: For example, you feel that someone's been in a bad mood. Irritable. So you draw conclusions that ultimately... well, you notice a change in a person, it means something is just [awry], so you need to make time for it. It has to be an aid. One of the aids.

Manager M4 slightly moves from acknowledging that coaching is set to solve some problems of employees and emphasises a notion of inner resources of an individual:

[M4]: As of today, well... coaching is an aid for working with a person... with his inner resources... if a need arises, either an inner or external need, if something isn't working, right from the core.

On the other hand, middle managers also see coaching as a mean to raise self awareness of employees:

[M2]: I think they have to keep working without me making things harder for them. To tell them that they're doing something wrong or just... Well, to me it is not that simple - to start telling them off for doing this or the other.

From the emergent tendencies I would like to emphasise that co-researchers partly regard coaching as a remedy and highlight that coaching is set to solve difficult work related problems of employees. It is one of legitimate aims of coaching, as Garvey *et al.* (2009) explain it. On the other hand, Hunt and Weintraub (2002) state, that it is more effective to coach an employee on existing strengths rather than “trying to create strength where none existed before” (p. 47). These authors further warn managers about possible negative outcomes, such as employee resistance to coaching focusing on their weaknesses.

Middle managers' conclusions

Most of the conclusions provided by co-researchers implied a degree of change. They began to formulate new intentions of their possible actions and new beliefs. The second interview catalysed a breakthrough in their awareness and beliefs, just as Anderson and Anderson (2001) comment.

Further findings demonstrate a form of managerial mind-shift that is congruent with these authors' implications as managers become aware of their beliefs. The findings in the context of this study reflect the expansion of co-researchers' conscious awareness and an increase of their understandings and perceptions of coaching contexts, their own roles, capabilities and even the organisations.

Speaking in terms of cognitive psychology, the co-researchers participated in a metacognitive process: by answering the questions of the second interview they were encouraged to think about their thinking. Managers were able to reexamine their experiences and according to Needleman (1999) to see if their initial appraisal of their experiences was accurate.

Table 2 shows categories of conclusions the co-researchers' had drawn from the relationship between their beliefs about organisational coaching and coaching practices.

Coaching applications within organisational setting
The role of a middle manager within coaching contexts
Organisational dimensions in relation to coaching
Own capabilities and development in terms of coaching
Coaching relationship

Table 2: The categories of middle managers' conclusions

Coaching applications within the organisational setting

Middle managers concluded that they rarely use coaching and would consider a possibility to employ coaching systemically - for example, as a daily managerial initiative for employee development purposes. They also acknowledged that they need to look for a wider range of opportunities and explore more varied means for application of coaching in their organisations:

[M1]: I need to recap on my coaching - make time for it and not just the daily jobs list. Also, omit routines - commit a good hour of my time for coaching

Manager M2 continues:

[M2]: It [coaching] was just the quick fix for these stressful situations. But as for development ... I didn't work with my subordinates as [one would with] students.

Manager M1 was very frank by stating that she used coaching for "mellowing" the issues rather than as a developmental tool. While concluding on these issues she was indirectly saying that those rare opportunities for coaching were used to justify her role rather than a good learning facilitation for her employees.

[M1]: I would conclude that I mistakenly used coaching for mellowing issues whereas it's rather the objectivity that matters. Coaching should make the situation clear.

Manager M3 also concluded that coaching is a rather wide developmental activity, "an investment", as he described it:

[M3]: So I mean to say is that coaching isn't just a momentary aid to raise effectiveness of an employee, it's an investment into the future.

As the findings within this category show, middle managers seem positive about moving from problem-focused approach in coaching (which is considered a rather narrow-orientated practice (Bartlett, 2007; Garvey *et al.*, 2009) to wider coaching applications, such as performance improvement, personal growth, and career development as defined by Mumford and Gold (2004).

The particular middle managers participating in this research demonstrated a sufficient degree of responsibility, pro-activity and positive attitude to performing as coaches within wider organisational contexts. The emphasis of these findings is that middle managers clearly understand that they should apply coaching in wider organisational contexts. These findings are congruent with recent research dedicated to managerial coaching practices. For example, Anderson *et al.* (2009) and Longenecker (2010), in surveys with 347 and 219 experienced managers respectively, also point out that managers acknowledge the need to expand coaching practices in organisations.

The role of a middle manager within coaching contexts

“What I do as a coach is very important”, middle manager M4 concluded when she was deliberating possible applications of coaching within her organisation, whilst manager M3 concluded that coaching should be a part of managers’ job, except some specific circumstances when there is no need for coaching:

[M3]:. I think that I couldn’t abandon coaching completely anyway. Because, I realise that coaching, which is means of training, is a certain habit.

Co-researchers also conclude that they should devote more attention to working with themselves as coaches, as manager M2 and manager M1 accordingly stated:

[M2]: I need to analyse my [managerial] behaviour more.

[M1]: It’s hard to change my [managerial] beliefs.

Manager M1 was also further concluding that the bias which forms in middle management level should be minimised, thus putting coaching practice in middle management level in line with organisational objectives.

All co-researchers in this study regard coaching as a natural part of their job, a daily approach congruent with their attitudes and perceptions towards themselves, their employees and organisations.

The conclusions within this category suggest that middle managers participating in this study are able to analyse the complexity of their roles. These findings also complement the notions of Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) who state that managers are capable to articulate the distinction of their managerial and coaching roles and recognise different circumstances in which they have to move between these roles.

Organisational dimensions in relation to coaching

Within this category of conclusions co-researchers were emphasising organisational dimensions which form a premise for their abilities to coach. Co-researchers also indirectly noted that in this case values of organisations should be congruent with values of coaching and values of coaching managers. Thus, if an organisation declares values consistent with coaching - for example, trust and openness - such declarations might produce only cynicism because managers might carry contrary beliefs based on their experiences, data, meanings, personal assumptions and conclusions as Senge *et al.*, (1994) comment.

Own capabilities and development in terms of coaching

Within this category the co-researchers concluded that they lack coaching skills required for more complex and systemic coaching aims, such as development of employees' abilities, motivation, and their performance. It might be due to their coaching training experience, which is fairly limited. However, in the context of this research, middle managers put emphasis on their cognitive abilities, which would form a premise for change of mindset and capabilities required for good coaching practices, rather than focus on their physical and practical skills.

The findings imply that the co-researchers are capable of clearly articulating self-criticism and adapting both effective and positive strategies to achieve the needed individual change. Additionally, looking at the conclusions provided by the co-researchers and drawing on Bandura's (1997) theory, middle managers expressed their thinking on how to perform better as coaches rather than contemplated on their deficiencies.

I suggest that the co-researchers hold a premise for a needed cognitive change for coaching, because they actively and openly share their thinking about their beliefs as well as their capabilities. Thus, developing a focused deep learning facilitation for middle managers that challenges their cognitions about their capabilities would form a strong basis for further learning of coaching skills.

Coaching relationship

This category of co-researchers' conclusions considers two main aspects. Firstly, middle managers demonstrated a sufficient degree of understanding of the complexity of the coaching relationship. Secondly, by discussing and drawing conclusions from their beliefs about organisational coaching and coaching practices they demonstrated their focus on further development as coaches.

In relation to the first aspect the co-researchers provided their insights to some established "truths" about coaching relationship, such as:

[M1]: I have to pay more attention to listening to a subordinate

[M2]: I have to avoid making conclusions in a coaching relationship

[M3]: I have to avoid forcing my own opinion upon a subordinate

I assume the keywords such as "listening", "attention", "observation", "managing relationship dynamics", "meaningful conversation" that tend to permeate these quotes form a premise for building a trust that is regarded a core condition for the development of a coaching relationship of a high quality (De Haan, 2008; Ladyshevsky, 2010). Ladyshevsky (2010) particularly notes that managers who coach need to learn to build trust by understanding its crucial components and putting into place practices that support manager-employee relationship. In a similar vein, Mumford and Gold (2004) also highlight trust as a catalyst for sharing of knowledge within organisational contexts.

In an unsurprisingly concurring manner, the co-researchers expressed great appreciation of a need for a coaching relationship of a high quality and serious ambition for developing the relevant learning within their organisation.

Summary of findings

There are two levels of findings in this research. The first level provides some insights into middle managers' beliefs about organisational coaching and relevant coaching practice. The second level of findings describes middle managers' conclusions and suggests further possibilities for

development of middle managers as coaches, because it is based on co-researchers' awareness of their beliefs and their coaching experiences.

As the co-researchers conclude, they do not confine themselves to common coaching settings (such as a problem-focused coaching approach dealing with weaknesses of an employee); rather they are open to considering wider applications of coaching. Co-researchers also demonstrate a fairly deep understanding of their own role as coaches and coaching as a managerial activity. They also provide some fresh insights on the dynamics of coaching relationships and their subordinates as coachees. They identify certain difficulties of a coaching relationship and focus on the possibilities to improve the quality of it. The co-researchers also demonstrate a degree of self-analysis and potential for their own development, thus showing a considerable disposition to become better coaches. They provide insightful implications for coaching development within organisational settings as they discuss the importance of organisational dimensions, such as organisational culture, senior management and other factors.

Implications for middle managers

Drawing on the conclusions made by the co-researchers, the following suggestions for middle managers who act as coaches are presented. The suggestions should serve as guidelines for middle managers who are stepping into the coaching field in their organizations :

1. As co-researchers pointed out that coaching is an investment into employee development and it serves as a motivational tool, middle managers should adequately rearrange their daily priorities, thus finding more time for employee development, coaching in particular. It would be beneficial if such coaching initiatives would be based on a regular and systemic practice.
2. Co-researchers also elaborated on coaching relationships and noted some risks which occur in coaching, thus such aspects as creating trust and openness in coaching relationship with subordinates remains the key element in making this relationship effective.
3. According to the notions provided by the co-researchers I would also encourage middle managers to devote a sufficient degree of attention to their own cognitive development by challenging their own beliefs and rethinking the existing coaching practices they are involved in. The opportunity for middle managers to receive coaching of a high quality would support this practice.
4. This study shows that middle managers' relationship with senior management influences middle managers' motivation to coach, thus I suggest middle managers should discuss coaching opportunities with senior management and ask for necessary help and support.
5. Co-researchers pointed out several organisational dimensions that have impact on coaching in their organisations, thus it indicates that middle managers should participate in alignment of those organisational dimensions with coaching initiatives. It would involve middle managers taking necessary steps in diminishing the barriers for coaching and/or improving organisational factors that have direct influence on coaching.
6. Middle managers should also encourage their subordinates to be coached. Such practices as demonstrating good examples of coaching would help to develop coaching as part of organisational culture.
7. Middle managers should also consider wider coaching applications such as regular employee development issues as well as development of the strong aspects of employee competencies.

Implications for coaching training

Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) suggest that coaching training programs conducted for managers should incorporate the topics related to surfacing managerial beliefs, which play an important role in managerial coaching practice. Drawing on this research study, I would like to support this notion and highlight that in order to develop managerial abilities to coach it is necessary to discuss the beliefs they hold about coaching. The research suggests it would help middle managers to consider their mind shift and would establish a basis for acquiring certain attitudes and skills needed in coaching.

The “side effect” of the research

It appeared that the process of this research study was consistent with an existential approach to coaching described by Spinelli and Horner (2007) and Spinelli (2010). There were congruencies with the phenomenological approach to coaching, as defined by Flaherty (1999). Both first and second interviews conducted within the context of this research implied alterations of understandings of individual stances of the co-researchers to their organisational life (Spinelli and Horner, 2007). Thus, I would suggest that this kind of “coaching” in the form of unstructured interviews was an effective developmental practice for them.

Limitations

Beliefs represent barely visible aspects of managerial activities (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002) – within the context of this study they were obtained in a form of experience of co-researchers, which I would regard in itself a limitation. The second limitation is the purposeful nature of the sample, as also noted by Ellinger and Bostrom (2002). Only four middle managers matching the specified criteria participated in this research study. The contrasting aspects, such as co-researchers’ age, different organisational backgrounds and experience of coaching practice in particular also need to be considered. Cultural issues should also be acknowledged as only managers from Lithuanian companies participated in this study.

Implications for further research

The findings of this study revealed potential areas to be addressed by future research. Firstly, each category of discussed beliefs that emerged from the data may be an object of further investigation. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine how the beliefs which middle managers hold are influenced and/or changed, for example, what organisational factors influence coaching as a managerial activity. What is needed to motivate middle managers to expand their coaching practices? Further research addressing the issues of the impact of managerial beliefs on coaching developments in organisations could potentially enrich the knowledge of the field.

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